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Media Moments

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For some time now I have been suffering from what I call “media moments.” We have all heard of “senior moments,” a term used mostly by people of mature years who suddenly experience a lapse in recall. The mind goes blank and the individual complains, “I’m having a senior moment.” A media moment is a little different. It happens when you are reading or hearing what passes for the news. You are appalled and frustrated by the conservative bias, the evasions, the non sequiturs, and the outright disinformation. Your mind does not go blank; you simply wish it would.

I recall one media moment I experienced while listening to the BBC news. Now the BBC supposedly provides coverage superior to what is heard on US mainstream media. It occasionally runs stories on European and Third World countries that are not likely to be carried by US newscasters. And BBC reporters ask confrontational questions of the personages they interview, applying a critical edge rarely shown by US journalists. But the truth is, when it comes to addressing the fundamental questions of economic power, corporate dominance, and Western globalization, BBC journalists and commentators are as careful as their American counterparts not to venture beyond certain orthodox parameters.

The recent BBC segment that gave me my media moment was a special report on asthma, of all things. It began by noting that the number of asthma sufferers has been increasing at the alarming rate of 50 percent each decade. “Scientists are puzzled,” for there is “no easy explanation” the narrator tells us. One factor is “genetic predisposition.” We hear from a British scientist who says, yes, there is definitely a hereditary factor behind asthma; it tends to run in families. Sure, I say to myself, asthma is increasing by 50 percent a decade because people with a genetic tendency toward the disease are becoming more sexually active and procreative than everyone else. I feel a media moment coming on.

There are other contributing factors to the asthma epidemic, the narrator continues, for instance “lifestyle.” He interviews another scientist who confirms this “scientific finding.” People are keeping cleaner homes, using air conditioning, and in general creating a more antiseptic lifestyle for themselves, the scientist says. This means they do not get enough

exposure to pollen, dust, and dirt the way people did in the good old days. Hence, they fail to build up a proper defense to such irritants.

These comments made me think back to my younger years when I lived next to a construction site that deposited daily clouds of dust over my abode for months on end. Rather than building up a hardy resistance, I developed an acute sensitivity to dust and mold that has stayed with me to this day. Does exposure to a toxic environment really make us stronger? Looking at the evidence on cancer, lung diseases, and various occupational ailments, we would have to conclude that exposure does not inoculate us; rather it seems to suppress or overload our immune systems, leaving us more not less vulnerable.

The BBC report on asthma then takes us to India for some actualité. A young man suffering from the disease is speaking in a rasping voice, telling of his affliction. This is accompanied by the squishing sound of a hand-held respirator. The victim says he has no money for medication. The narrator concludes that the disease persists among the poor in such great numbers because they cannot afford medical treatment. I say to myself, yes, but this doesn't tell us what causes asthma in the first place.

Another "expert" is interviewed. He says that in India, as in most of the world, asthma is found in greatest abundance in the congested cities, less so in the suburbs, and still less in the countryside. No explanation is given for this, but by now I can figure it out for myself: the inner-city slum dwellers of Calcutta enjoy too antiseptic a lifestyle; too much air-conditioning and cleanliness has deprived them of the chance to build up a natural resistance. At this point I can feel the media moment drawing ever closer.

The BBC report makes no mention of how neoliberal "free market" policies have driven people off the land, causing an explosion in slum populations throughout the world. These impoverished urban areas produce the highest asthma rates. And the report says nothing about how, as cigarette markets in the West become saturated, the tobacco companies vigorously pursue new promotional drives in Asia, Africa, and Latin America, leading to a dramatic climb in Third World smoking rates, which certainly does not help anyone's respiratory system.

Finally the BBC narrator mentions pollution. He says it "may" be a factor, but more study is needed. May? Furthermore, he asks, "Is pollution really a cause or is it merely a trigger?" He seems to be leaning toward "trigger," although by now I am having trouble seeing the difference. The media moment has come upon me full force. I begin talking back at my radio, posing such cogent and measured comments as "You jackass BBC flunky announcer!"

Media apologists like to point out that journalists face severe constraints of time and space, and must necessarily reduce complex realities into brief reports; hence, issues are conflated, and omissions and oversights are inevitable. But this BBC report went on for some ten minutes, quite a long time by newscast standards. There would have been ample opportunity to say something about how the use of automobiles has skyrocketed throughout the entire world, causing severe damage to air quality especially in cities. There would have been enough time to mention how the destruction of rain forests and the dramatic increase in industrial emissions have contributed to an alarming CO₂ buildup and a commensurate decline in the atmosphere's oxygen content. The BBC could have told us how the oil cartels have kept us hooked on fossil fuel, while refusing to develop nonpolluting, inexpensive tidal, wind, thermal, and solar energy systems.

But mainstream media bosses would dismiss such revelations as “editorializing” and ideologically motivated. Instead, this BBC report chose to be “balanced” and “objective” by blaming the victims, their genetic predispositions, their antiseptic lifestyles, and their inability to buy medications.

Newscasters who want to keep their careers afloat learn the fine art of evasion. We should never accuse them of doing a poor and sloppy job of reporting. If anything, with great skill they skirt around the most important points of a story. With much finesse they say a lot about very little, serving up heaps of junk news filled with so many empty calories and so few nutrients. Thus do they avoid offending those who wield politico-economic power. It is enough to take your breath away.

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